

Cooperative Engagement



Working with and engaging educators to improve school district culture and trust

Peter Vedro

A recent study by Harvard and Columbia University economics professors found that the single most important element in a student's past, present, and future success is the caring given by their teachers.

Around the world, the label of "teacher" is an honorific title. The person and the profession are honored because most people affected by teachers recognize their incredible, life-long value.

Dr. Stephen Paine, co-author of the landmark McGraw-Hill Research Foundation study on educational competitiveness, suggests that, "The most important lesson the U.S. can take from the countries that have been most successful in achieving high PISA scores for their students is to begin investing in the preparation and development of

high-quality teachers, while at the same time taking steps to elevate the status of the entire profession to a higher level of respect and regard."

With this in mind, it's best to treat our educators as we would any precious commodity. Given their institutional knowledge and understanding of systems and structures, who better to engage in finding best practices for their given education environment?

However, in the current political atmosphere, getting teacher input in district-level decisions can be challenging. Arriving at a sustainable system of shared responsibilities and rewards between teachers (and their unions) and administrators and school boards, rests on reevaluating our understanding of the concept of negotiations. (Of course, since Act 10, negotiations are limited to negotiations over base wages and meeting

and conferring with staff on issues other than base wages.)

Although both parties may have good intentions, negotiations almost always devolve into a competitive and adversarial power struggle. David Sarnoff, the founder of RCA, the now defunct electronics company, once said, "Competition brings out the best in products and the worst in people." Anyone who has ever participated in the leadership game "Win As Much As You Can" (see sidebar) knows this for fact. As in the game, it is the unconscious meanings we attribute to words that drive our behavior.

■ New Approaches

In the Baraboo School District, we have made a conscious effort to engage our teachers and level the

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playing field, so-to-speak, not just in negotiations but in day-to-day conversations with our teachers. This is part of a methodology I'm calling "cooperative engagement." Cooperative engagement starts with honoring a set of core principles that guide discussion and behavior. Again, these are important not just in negotiations but in regular interactions with school district staff.

Cooperative Engagement:

- Honor "rice bowls" (economic):
 - No one should go "backward" in compensation, everyone should be made as "whole" as possible.
- Honor "perspectives" (people):
 - The best solutions do not come from the board, the administration, or the teachers union or

teachers as separate entities; the best answers surface from "cooperative engagement" of all parties.

- The people doing the work usually have the best perspective on where the real "obstacles" to success are as well as how to move forward effectively and efficiently.
- Honor "change" (incremental progress to the goal):
 - Ask three questions:
 - What should we start doing to make things better?
 - What should we stop doing that's getting in the way of making things better?
 - What should we continue doing that's working great?

In Practice

District Administrator Dr. Crystal Ritzenthaler, along with her leadership team and school board,

"Win As Much as You Can!"



The "Win as Much as You Can!" game

(sometimes called the "X" or "Y" game) is a staple in leadership development programs. Usually played in units of four (either solo, with a partner, or as a team), the goal of the game is the same as its name, "Win as Much as You Can!"

It's played in 10 consecutive rounds, each increasing in value. At the beginning of each round, players secretly choose and write down on their own scorecard either an "x" or a "y" and at a given signal, all call out their choice at the same time — the "win" (or "lose") is then determined by what each member of the game has chosen. At selected rounds, the players can talk to their partners and later to the entire group about what they believe is the best choice to make on the next round to fulfill the goal of the game, which of course is to "Win as Much as You Can!"

We know the stated "goal" of the game, but what is its

deeper objective? Why is it included as a fundamental part of leadership training? Playing the game, it becomes clear that the choice each person makes — including our own — is driven (consciously or unconsciously) by how we define the terms "Win" and "You."

If we see the game as "zero-sum" (there can be only one "winner" and it is going to be "me"), we act by making certain choices. If we see it differently, we act by making other choices. In the absence of clarity, our behavior tends to be driven by our own unconscious set of criteria (not good or bad but maybe incomplete). At the selected rounds when players are able to talk to each other, these differences in definition become the basis for discussion and the opportunity to understand the multiple ways in which both "win" and "you" can be defined as well as the various situations in which they can be appropriately applied. It also becomes clear that the choices we make have consequences. Just ask any one that coaches — in sports, arts, business, and family — individually we may "win" the game but "lose" the bigger prize.

is moving to fulfill our potential by utilizing this process.

“We are sitting around the table together to share our guiding principles with one another and problem solve together,” Ritzenthaler said. “This collaborative engagement takes place not only within negotiations, but more importantly as part of our day to day interactions.”

As Ritzenthaler said, “we are sitting around the table together.” When meeting with staff in negotiations or other instances, it’s important to think about how the different parties are arranged at the table or meeting space. Rather than allowing people to sit on opposite (opposing) sides of the table, try intermingling. Rather than facing-off nose-to-nose with each other, try standing side-by-side facing the problem. These slight changes in physical relationship begin to reinforce the psychological reality: we are in this together and it is our problem to solve together.

These changes have made a noticeable difference. According to our Board President Kevin Vodak, following the principles of cooperative engagement has made this year’s negotiations not only the least contentious, but the most productive as well.

There seems to be a trickle-down effect to our schools as well. Paul Kujak, a veteran middle school teacher said, “I have a hard time thinking back in my 32-plus years here at Baraboo to a time when the status of the middle school was more positive. There has been a new emphasis that we are ‘all’ in this together; there is a culture of effective collaboration amongst the staff ... that promotes extensive vesting in each other. One can feel the genuine concern and respect that staff members have for one another. This then trickles down to the students as



well and thus we have as wonderful of a learning atmosphere in the building that I can ever remember.”

However, we still have a long way to go to fulfill the promise of cooperative engagement. We are still occasionally hostage to our habits and our past. But without cooperative engagement or some other process that recognizes with substance the value of all in our educational community, we are doomed to continually recreate the past. ■

Vedro is a member of the Baraboo School Board and president and CEO of VisionQuest International (www.visionquestinternational.org) and a former vice president and senior managing consultant with The Covey Leadership Center (Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and Principle-Centered Leadership).



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